

Date: 1518, January 22. [Santo Domingo, La Española]

Theme: An early colonial official in La Española stressed the importance of enslaved Blacks as labor force and proposed a triangular trans-Atlantic open trade to supply them to the colony

Source: PARES, Portal de Archivos, Españoles, Archivo General de Indias, PATRONATO, 174, R. 8

By the beginning of 1518, La Española's *Audiencia* judge or *oidor* Alonso Zuazo was convinced of the fundamental importance of a subjected local population that could be used as main labor force for the sustenance of the colony as it existed, "because—in his words—the good of all these so extensive and spacious kingdoms is in them being populated by Indians, and the latter missing, there is lack of everything," and those "lands so abundant and most fertile" would go 'barren with no usefulness nor yield' (fo. 40r.)

Actually the quick dwindling of the native population of La Española, as a result of the destructive impact of the conquest and the initial colonization, had already persuaded Zuazo of the importance of (enslaved) black Africans as labor force for La Española's economy as well as for the colony's survival in general, and the Spanish colonial official was trying his best to persuade the Crown with his correspondence about this matter.

Using a notion that sounds like an early version of what centuries later would be called "triangular trade," Zuazo proposed for ships to travel from La Española to Spain to pick there items or commodities that would be of interest to Africans, and from there to travel to Cape Verde, a Portuguese colonial possession off the coast of West Africa, and exchange them for as many young, non-Europeanized ("bozales"), enslaved Black Africans of both sexes as possible, and from there to load them up on the same vessels and hurl them across the Atlantic to La Española, where they would replenish the early colony's Black forced-labor pool.

Once in La Española, Zuazo proposed, the enslaved Africans should be married and settled forming villages and put to work to relieve La Española's Amerindian (mostly Taino) labor force, with the hope that the Blacks would "adopt" the Spanish culture ("hacerse en esta isla a nuestras costumbres") and be able to extract "infinite gold" for the settlers and the Crown.

Another key circumstance among the difficulties and lack of settler population that La Española was experiencing, according to Zuazo, was de monopoly that the Crown had given to the big merchants of Seville, in southern Spain, over the trade the settlers of La Española could engage in, forcing the latter to buy and sell only from ships coming from and going to Seville's port, with prices of La Española's imports and exports imposed by the Sevillians with no competition and leaving La Española's residents and producers with no margin of profit. Zuazo was an obvious supporter of free, open trade, which in his words would bring "abundance" to the colony's economy (fo. 47r.)

Zuazo was keenly aware of the transatlantic, intra-imperial power struggle involved in this colonial arrangement, indicating that Seville's merchants were expected to oppose any attempt to open the colonial markets, but hoping that the Crown would understand and support what he considered to be the Americas' greater economic wealth ("these regions are more than twenty times Seville"), but maybe forgetting that while the economic resources in the New World were potential, literally to be exploited, the great power in money of the merchants of

Seville was absolutely immediate, and that probably made a difference in the eyes and politically pragmatic calculations of the Crown.

Altogether, Zuazo's comments and testimonies (see also [Manuscript No. 133](#)) are a useful source to understand the overall historical dynamics taking place in La Española at the time, or at least to learn of this observer's perspectives of what was occurring among his fellow conquerors, the natives and the enslaved Africans three decades after the arrival of Columbus' first expedition.